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ABSTRACT

The expression of individual freedom and fear of the impairment of that freedom, two themes frequently found in modern American literature, can also be applied to a discussion of educational history. Today's "revisionist" historians condemn the progressive of Dewey's persuasion, who sacrificed the individual to socialization and the institution of American education, and espouse Paul Goodman's and Theodore Roszak's ideas about the individual's survival in spite of society. The author sees the "revisionists", trapped by their fear of loss of freedom, denying socialization in a gesture of revolt; she finds similar themes in American literature. Acceptance of the reality of socialization, a contour that must form every individual's life, would provide a balanced view of education and life. She emphasizes the normal tension between freedom and social exigencies, which would require a change from revisionist revolt and negativism but a retention of individual and social awareness. (JH)

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IDENTITIES AND CONTOURS:

AN APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

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Introducing City of Words, a study of recent American fiction, Tony Tanner writes:

> I shall try to show that there is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices, and repudiations are all your own; and that there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous. (1)

This duality of dream and dread has haunted many of our writers since the days when James Fenimore Cooper was writing Leatherstocking Tales. Until the present day and the appearance of new or "revisionist" educational history, it has not found expression in the literature of education. Educators and literary artists have traditionally looked upon the culture through different perspectives: educators from the

vantage point of concern with socialization and "improvement"; writers, from the vantage point of concern with the plight of the person in an ambiguous, often threatening world. Educational reformers, most particularly, have given voice to what they chose to believe was a "public philosophy," a national consensus of opinion, whereas artists have concentrated on what Harry Levin calls "the dark other half of the situation, and their distinctive attitude has been introspection, dissent or irony." Levin, who is a literary historian and critic, goes on:

> Where the voice of the majority is by definition affirmative, the spirit of independence is likeliest to manifest itself by employing the negative: by saying no in thunder--as Melville wrote to Hawthorne--though bidden by the devil himself to say yes. (2)

The "no" is neither didactic nor political, however. The independent artist is not interested in remaking institutions. Forming his own perceptions of reality, he is simply attempting to provoke others to see for themselves, to order their own experiences of what it is to be alive in America and to exist in history.

It interests me to note that the new educational historians--Michael Katz, Clarence Karier, Joel Spring, Paul Violas, Colin Greer, and others like them--are saying "no in thunder." In the context of educational history they are employing the negative in order to expose the "legend" of the public school. In doing so, they are also redefining the school as "a vast social machine for the imposition of values and control."[3] They are demonstrating the impossibility (within existing

structures) of educational reform. Incidentally, they are suggesting that any efforts to do "humanistic" or "non-cognitive" teaching in the schools are, by definition, attempts to impose social controls. Katz wishes the public school to concentrate on teaching fundamental skills "and exclude the conscious attempt to formulate social attitudes."[4] The underlying conviction seems to be that any concern with values and attitudes becomes, inevitably, a process of "formulation." Given the nature of our society, it is implied, there is no hope of freeing students to choose themselves. Spring is even more explicit. Once the power of family, church, and community began waning at the beginning of this century, he says, the school became "the agency charged with the responsibility of maintaining social order and cohesion and of instilling individuals with codes of conduct and social values that would insure the stability of existing social relationships." If this is the case, the teacher within existing schools has no alternative but to be an accomplice of the system, a "good German" in an immoral world.

There is, it follows, a doubleness in the new revisionist history. On the one hand, having broken with moralistic approaches, the historians are disclosing phenomena long hidden by official pieties and myths. Their researches have taken them to open fields where they have learned to penetrate relationships between social structures and social purposes. They have demonstrated the long neglect of pluralism, the exclusion of immigrants and ethnic groups from concern, the curious conservatism of municipal and school "reforms." They have identified connections previously ignored between the school and politics,

education and social stratification, class values and racism; they have exposed the rationalizations of professionalism. Questioning inexorability in the development of organizational structures, they have displayed movements for and resistances to local control. They have, in sum, forever invalidated what Lawrence Cremin described as the "narrowly institutional" approach,[6] in the light of which their work is liberating and sound. Clearly, it has opened up inclusive perspectives on what was actually happening within and around the schools.

At the same time, however, the conceptual focus seems to me to be peculiarly partial. The concern is almost exclusively with the patterning of individuals and the evils of social control. Little or nothing is said about the individual's own social reality and the possibilities of his transforming it. Little is said about the problematic of community life and the need to create culture as well as to perpetuate it. Yet these issues too have arisen in history, even <u>if</u> conditioning has been ubiquitous. The "masses" have chosen as well as acquiesced. Educational reformers have chosen in the context of the society they have perceived. Too frequently, the school system seems to have become the archetype of bureaucracy; its anomalous roles as reflector and producer of values and beliefs have been in some way overlooked. Perhaps because the new historians' professional concentration is on education, they have felt obliged to discover the prime source of the "plots" against the person within the public school. This has led them to some neglect of multiple causation when they come to tracing the effects of such ideas as those linked to progressivism. Preoccupied with images of monoliths and patterning, they see victimization; they see us all submerged in

a system we never chose.

"It is not mere selection," writes W. H. Walsh, "but selection in accordance with criteria of importance, that the expositor brings into history...."[7] "Our concerns shape the questions that we ask," says Michael Katz, "and, as a consequence, determine what we select from the virtually unlimited supply of 'facts'."[8] The criteria being brought into history by the revisionists are partly derived from such constructs as those devised by Paul Goodman and Theodore Roszak, both of whom Katz credits for affecting his concerns. Goodman, as is well known, described compulsory education as a "universal trap" and believed that the schools "less and less represent <u>any</u> human values, but simply adjustment to a mechanical system."[9] Roszak wrote at length about "centralized bigness," the "regime of expertise," and a technocratic system which generates its own legitimation.[10] Both were centrally concerned with the person and his survival, either by means of work, wandering, and self-motivated inquiry, or (in Roszak's terms) through the proclamation of "a new heaven and a new earth so vast, so marvelous that the inordinate demands of technical expertise must of necessity withdraw in the presence of such splendor to a subordinate and marginal status in the lives of men."[11]

In addition, there is the sense in which the new history has been affected by the same forces that have moved novelists to reject imprisoning structures and seek out new narrative forms. The old forms, as they see them, not only constrain and inhibit; they <u>de</u>form; they falsify what exists. In somewhat similar mood, the new historians

describe bureaucratic structures and "an implausible ideology ever more divorced from reality"[12] which distort perception and at once defile identity. The structures or the modes of organization they have in mind resemble the "new machines, new forms of organization, new ways of increasing efficiency"[13] that have taken over the country in Kurt Vonnegut's Player Piano. They evoke the all-encompassing bureaucracy, the syndicate in Joseph Heller's Catch-22. ("'They all belong to the syndicate,' Milo said. 'And they know that what's good for the syndicate is good for the country, because that's what makes Sammy run.'"[14]) They are like the mental hospital, as perceived by Big Chief in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest:[15] a false, automated environment where processed pictures of the "real" are forever being projected on the walls. All these metaphors--machines, syndicates, hospitals--point towards rigidity and alienating controls. In a world so dominated, there is scarcely any hope for the individual. If he rebels, he will be reconditioned, lobotomized, or forced to run away to save his life.

This response to the technological society is in many ways warranted; and I do not deny the threat to the individual implicit both in technology and in what Hannah Arendt calls "rule by Nobody"--"or the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible...."[16] Nor do I deny the findings of sociologists like Emile Durkheim, who speak of the internalization of external "social facts" and their transformation into constraints upon the person--another way of describing

social control.[17] It is entirely apparent to me that the 19th century pioneers of school reform were convinced that controls had to be imposed on human beings, most particularly the alien and the poor, if social stability were to be achieved and if "Americanization" were to succeed.[18] It is not so apparent to me that the progressives, for all their middle class and gradualist orientation, were consciously attempting to maintain the class structure when they laid their stress on intelligence and scientific method.

Clarence Karier, in an almost paradigmatic revisionist treatment of liberalism, condemns John Dewey and his fellow-progressives for the present crisis in our culture:

> In a very real sense the crisis is a result of both the success and the failure of the enlightenment philosophy of progress. The collective side of that philosophy with its scientifically organized technology and computer-managed bureaucracy has become a reality; on the other side, however, individual freedom, dignity, and well-being have not fared so well. Caught up in collective institutional progress, the individual has become a means rather than an end to social order. (19)

Computer-managed bureaucracy must be granted; so must the scientifically organized technology. But what evidence is there that a causal relation exists between Dewey's "cultural participatory perspective" and the staving off of revolutionary change? What evidence exists that the masses were so indoctrinated with the uses of the scientific method as the key to social progress that they readily acquiesced "in the face

of political, economic, and military power"[20] ? What evidence exists for the claim that Dewey was able to anticipate the corporate state and was, for that reason above all others, stressing the values of cooperative intelligence?

C. Vann Woodward once wrote with respect to our attitudes towards history:

> In moods of disenchantment and cynicism and self-criticism Americans have not contrived nihilistic or anarchist theories but have reinterpreted their past again, this time in an iconoclastic spirit, debunked their heroes, ridiculed the Puritan theocracy, and dwelt on the human motives of the Founding Fathers and Constitutional Framers. Other moods, ranging from complacency to hysterical insecurity, have registered themselves in laboured reinterpretations of American history. (21)

This may, in fact, be the first time that historians have contrived admittedly anarchist theories; and it is interesting that they should have been developed in the context of educational history. The explanation may have to do with the long persistence of a kind of educational hagiography. It may be that iconoclastic reinterpretations came too late, considering the inequities and injustices that multiplied as the years went by, considering the failures of the schools. In any case, whether due to preoccupation with the danger of manipulations or to a generalized disgust with school systems _qua_ systems, the new history has sounded increasingly anarchist themes. Joel Spring points out that "anarchists oppose the existence of the state in any form because it destroys individual autonomy."[22] With autonomy as their core concern,

they treat the educational problem as mainly one of social control.

There is a degree of irony in the fact that Dewey and other progressives believed they were rebelling against waste and exploitation as well as "formalism" in the early years of this century.[23] Concerned about "the constraints of previous morality and ideology," they were turning their attention to real social problems and to the dynamics of human growth. As Dewey saw it, of course, the most damaging constraints were cognitive ones. The freedoms so long fought for and so dearly prized meant little if they were not backed up by "intelligence and informed conviction." He saw individualism as "a product of the relaxation of the grip of the authority of custom and tradition as standards of belief."[24] He saw cooperative intelligence as a way of reconstructing shared experience, and shared experience ("vitally shared") as educative to those who actively participated in it. "To have the same ideas about things which others have," he wrote in Democracy and Education, "to be like-minded with them, and thus to be really members of a social group, is therefore to attach the same meanings to things and to acts which others attach. Otherwise there is no common understanding, and no community life. But in a shared activity, each person refers what he is doing to what the other is doing, and vice-versa. That is, the activity of each is placed in the same inclusive situation."[25] Explaining what he meant by social control, he went on to talk of the shared experience characteristic of a competitive game and said it illustrated "the general principle of social control of individuals without the violation

of freedom." And then:

> Games are generally competitive. If we took instances of co-operative activities in which all members of a group take part, as for example in well-ordered family life in which there is mutual confidence, the point would be even clearer. In all such cases it is not the will or desire of any one person which establishes order but the moving spirit of the whole group. The control is social, but individuals are parts of a community, not outside it. (26)

It must be admitted, of course, that Dewey was much concerned with guidance or social direction, with the cultivation of dispositions he assumed to be "desirable," with meeting demands set up "by current social occupations," and with the assimilative or unifying power of the school. There are few signs of concern with fundamental inequities in the culture or even with the culture's insufficiencies. Apparently untouched by the exclusion of minority groups from the mainstream of economic life, he gave no sign of recognizing that more was required than a celebration of "the shared cooperative activities which are the normal source of order." Nor did he appear to understand the increasing feelings of powerlessness suffered by individuals who had no share in policy-making, whose "participation" was ultimately meaningless. He had written in 1916 that "A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind

which secure social changes without introducing disorder."[27] There is no question that this sounds conservative, appalling, "moderate," classical in its cherishing of social harmony. It should be noted, however, that this is a normative statement: Dewey was describing the "good society," the one that might come into being if enough constraints were broken, if planning were intelligent and humane. Looking back on it over half a century, aware of how far we are from attaining "a society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms," we are likely to discern a certain innocence in Dewey, if not a blindness to what was happening in the world. The new historians select out something else to emphasize, it seems to me: the "habits of mind" intended to bring change without "disorder." This strikes them, naturally, as an explicitly counter-revolutionary statement. Moreover, it seems to incorporate and crystallize the point of view (first defined in the mid-nineteenth century) that public education could be relied upon to change the world. By implication, more radical, more political options are closed. If this is how Dewey's normatives are read, his influence cannot but be considered to be protective of the status quo. The "direction" he spoke of cannot but be considered to be manipulative--on behalf of social stability and the myth of the common school. The revisionist, puncturing the liberal hope, concludes by categorizing Dewey as a proponent of "a controlled economy, state planning, group thought, and managed change."[28] The alternative? A concentration on the release of individuality; a deschooled society; an end to social control; the "abiding American dream."

A selective reading, then, suggests that the reliance on intelligence and gradualism deluded people and kept them from inventing the radical political strategies required for effecting significant change. I am willing to accept that as a charge against liberalism, as I am willing to accept the revisionists' picture of the contemporary crisis. But I find questionable the tendency to set aside, in consequence, the problem of socialization. Even if it is the case that socialization in an inequitable society leads to destruction of the individual or to the maintenance of unjust social arrangements, a civilizing or enculturating process is always at work. The human condition is such that limits and sublimations are inevitable if human beings are to live together in equity. To deny this and to avoid the issue of social reality leads, I think, to a denial of a paradox that lies at the very heart of education, wherever and however it takes place. It is a paradox American writers have recognized, no matter how often they have said "no in thunder." Tony Tanner calls it "a fundamental and inescapable paradox: that to exist a book, a vision, a system, like a person, has to have an outline--there can be no identity without contour."

> But contours signify arrest, they involve restraint and the acceptance of limits. The main villain, Urizen, in Blake's myth is named after horizon, that is to say limit or boundary, and I think many American writers share Blake's feeling. For restraint means the risk of rigidity, and rigidity, so the feeling goes, is just about the beginning of rigor mortis. Between the non-identity of pure fluidity and the fixity involved in all definitions--in words
>
> or

> or in life--the American writer moves and knows he moves. (29)

In Herman Melville's Billy Budd, the society on the man o'war is (by wartime necessity) so rigid in its controls that the innocent, spontaneous man cannot survive. Captain Vere recognizes the evil that has been at work when Billy unintentionally kills Claggart; and he cherishes Billy in his innocence. Nevertheless, he warns the drumhead court to be guided by duty rather than compassion. And long after the execution, he insists that "forms, measured forms are everything...."[30] The alternative, as he sees it, is submission to "inviolate nature primeval," the blankness of the encompassing sea. In Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, the narrator takes refuge in an underground room from a society that has never recognized him as a man. He lights the room with 1,369 bulbs; because, without light, he has no form--and "to be unaware of one's form is to live a death."[31] Haunted by images of formlessness, rejecting the fixed categories of the outer world, he must somehow create his own orders. The alternative is continuing darkness, invisibility--the "chaos" against which he must conceive a pattern if he is to live. Without that pattern, there would be nothingness, undifferentiated fluidity; he would be a blob. In John Barth's End of the Road, Jacob Horner is helped to overcome his "weatherlessness" (immobility, formlessness) through mythotherapy, a technique for imposing form on experience by assigning roles for people to play. In time, he recognizes how roles, names, "scripts," and myths obscure actualities, how they hide from the individual the contingencies of

life--the "raggedness of things." He sees that even language falsifies and betrays experience; "but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel like a man, alive and kicking. It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all, I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful myth-making, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work."[32]

There are implications in all three illustrations, as there would be in numerous others that might be culled from American literature. There is the terrible question of duty and responsibility; there is the related question of whether any society can exist if each member--be he violent, bigoted, exploitative, or innocent--is permitted to follow impulse, if there are no consequences when harm is done. There is the matter of preventing invisibility in an unjust world, just as there is the problem of permitting diverse people to create their own visibility, their own significant form. And, finally, there is the question raised by the necessity of languages and categories and types of organization, all of which deform to an extent, all of which betray.

The point is not only the continuing consciousness of the tension between "raggedness" and falsifying orders, identity and contour, individuality and social control. There is a need for a tragic perception of the accommodations that are required if a person is to survive at all. Most of our writers have recognized this, understood what Melville called the "power of blackness." The exceptions are those Quentin Anderson describes as "imperial" selves: Emerson,

Whitman, and Henry James, each of whom had "a profound extrasocial commitment." Anderson says that "their imaginative work ignores, elides, or transforms history, politics, heterosexuality, the hope for purposive change. They avoid or omit any acknowledgment that our experience has stubborn and irreducible elements which we cannot in a lifetime either alter or understand."[33] Nothing, it seems to me, would be more at odds with a viable approach to education or to educational history.

It is clear enough that the original school reformers were not aware of paradox. As they saw it, the imposition of controls on children led to their becoming independent citizens with the rights of free men. The reformers' moral absolutism was such as to prevent them from separating "voluntary compliance" from the ability to live in an enlightened republic, from self-determination itself. The pressures of expansion, urbanization, commercialization, and the rest alienated too many men from the functioning community for the traditional claims to be convincingly made. The progressives were sharply aware of splits in experience and the growing tendency to think in terms of either/ors; but they were no more aware of the fundamental paradox than were their forerunners. John Dewey's transactional emphasis, along with his concern for continuities and communication, was intended to allay tensions, to overcome perceived discrepancies. The revisionists of today seem to me to skirt the paradox by assuming that identity can indeed exist without contour, that contour is intrinsically hostile to identity. They seem, like Anderson's "imperial self," to avoid acknowledging the "stubborn and irreducible elements in experience, the

elements that make our condition tragic and our future forever unclear.

Saying that, I am not proposing that we take an aesthetic view of the history of education, nor that historians resign themselves to cosmic injustices and the limits imposed by mortality. I am proposing a more complex approach--without hope of a scapegoat, without hope of a final resolution. The tension between the individual and civilization has been and will be irreducible. Education, because it takes place at the intersection where the demands for social order and the demands for personal autonomy conflict, must proceed through and by means of the tension. Teachers, whose risks and failures are functions of the uncertainty, can only try to enable students to understand how the social reality afflicts them, how (having confronted what community controls mean in their own life worlds) they can take action to transform. If it is indeed the case, as Christopher Jencks and his colleagues say it is, that the school is of "marginal" importance when it comes

to determining the success and status of individuals, educators may begin concerning themselves with making schools not only "satisfying places to be" but places where individuals may discover their originality, create their own autonomy. They may cease treating schools like factories and their students like products if they recognize that the schools, under present circumstances, cannot--and probably never will--successfully meet "market demand."

Significant changes are probably unlikely, given present-day structural organizations; but I believe, as Michael Katz does, that there are possibilities for alternative arrangements, many of them

under the control of small communities, where young people--like their elders--must learn to define themselves. The forms of education may change; but there will continue to be specialized agencies of instruction in an increasingly complex society without great concern for the young. Reform, therefore, will never be complete. The society will never become benevolent and pure. Attempts will be made to manipulate and control--on the media, on the streets, in the workplaces, in the schools. Efforts will be made--unpredictably, passionately, spontaneously--to rebel. And, as has happened repeatedly before, numbers of persons will claim the right to determine the quality of their membership in the society. Some will demand significant participation in making policies that affect them; others will assert their inherent right to dissent, to disobey; still others will withdraw into private undergrounds, self-study, self-creation. The majority will live their lives, "living and partly living," acquiescing and consuming, because they know no better way.

Educational history, I believe, must make room for incompletion and for "raggedness." It must avoid historicism, tempting as it is; it must find explanations supplementary to determinist ones; it must allow for the insertion of free will at crucial moments of time. On occasion, the new historians must seek to encompass those who have dropped out of history, who cannot be subsumed under categories like "masses" and "minorities" and "ethnic groups." In Invisible Man, after Tod Clifton is shot by a policeman (and having plunged, as the narrator says, "outside of history"), the hero thinks:

> For history records the patterns of men's

> lives, they say: Who slept with whom and with what results; who fought and who won and who lived to lie about it afterwards. All things, it is said, are duly recorded --all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by. But the cop would be Clifton's historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner, and I was the only brother in the watching crowd. And I, the only witness for the defense, knew neither the extent of his guilt nor the nature of his crime. Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down? (35)

The new historians have gone far in the direction of demystifying our educational history;and, by so doing, they have removed the screens that kept us from seeing some of what was never seen, heard, or known --because it was not "of importance," because it did not fit the recorder's ideology. Now I hope they will move past the negative, past their presentism. I hope they will venture now and then into imaginative literature, into oral histories and diaries and letters as well as into demographies. They have expanded our statistical knowledge; they have exposed the impact of class values; they have demonstrated the proliferation of social controls. The time has come to confront the paradox that escapes measurement, the paradox of civilization itself.

end

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